

The Mother in Heaven and Eve: Models of Femeness in Early Mormonism

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In 1869, at the age of seventeen, Martha Cragun Cox entered into a Mormon polygamous marriage. She found it hard to adapt to her new life, noting the strict rules of the house, “the main rule being perfect obedience” to her husband as the head of the home.¹ Later, as she continued to experience the difficulties of this lifestyle, one of her sister-wives gave her a piece of advice: “Whenever my heart comes between me and my Father’s work it will have to break. And if you have not learned that lesson the sooner you learn it the better for you.”² At around this same time, Elizabeth Kane, a non-Mormon guest of Mormon prophet Brigham Young, remarked on the deeply patriarchal character of the community—a community where men lived with multiple wives in self-conscious emulation of Old Testament patriarchs and for the glory of a fatherly god. She wrote: “During my whole stay in Utah, I have found the poetry of the Bible running in my mind. I have felt myself to be living in that old Syrian world amid a people whose ways are like those of the ancient pastoral folk to whom Isaiah spoke.”³

Yet, scholars of Mormonism have often noted the seeming contradiction within the early Latter-day Saint (LDS) community between this deliberately patriarchal theology and institutional structure of the church, and the active and oftentimes quite independent lives of LDS women. Well into the twentieth century, women presided over

¹ Martha Cragun Cox, “Autobiography,” The Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 125.

² Cox, 136.

³ Elizabeth Kane, *A Gentile Account of Life in Utah’s Dixie, 1872-3* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1995), 129.

their own church auxiliary and charitable institution, the Relief Society.⁴ They ran this organization with their own funds, and sometimes even built their own, separate meetinghouses. In Utah starting in 1870, and with a suspension due to provisions of the anti-polygamy Edmunds-Tucker Act, women voted in local and state elections, as they also attended institutions of higher education from the time of their founding. Some women ran their own businesses, or became professional teachers, lawmakers, or doctors. And even though Elizabeth Kane was concerned about the health and happiness of LDS women, she admired and was bewildered by the independence of these women. She was impressed with the way that, in typical “Utah fashion,” men and women mixed together in social gatherings and meetings, at one point recording with wonder that a woman took a leadership position in a local garden club that had both men and women members.⁵

Historians have speculated on how and why LDS women were able to sustain this level of limited independence in the face of the strictures of their faith. A number of scholars, including, Lawrence Foster, have argued that the realities of polygamous marriage and the subsequent harsh government campaign against the practice actually forced women to be active, independent, *de facto* heads of their respective households.⁶ Polygamy and the legal reactions against it transformed the lives of Mormon women in ways they and their families could not have imagined.

But where did women find religious, even theological justification for their transformed lives? How and where did they mine their young faith for female-focused religious inspiration? The answers to these questions are many and complex. In this essay, I want to focus on just two, but important answers—the Mother in Heaven and Eve.

⁴ For more details of women’s work in the Relief Society and within the Mormon community, see: *Women of the Covenant: The Story of the Relief Society*, edited by Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russel Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992).

⁵ Kane, 115.

⁶ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1984).

The basic theology, beliefs, and practices of the early LDS church were self-consciously patriarchal. Women were expected to take a less prominent role at every step on the path to salvation. But what is not so clear and what needs to be now highlighted is that this distinctive, restorationist, literal LDS theology also held within it an abiding tension over the interpretation of femaleness and the role of women within the plan of salvation and the institutional church. Not far beneath the surface of this straightforward and seemingly thoroughgoing patriarchal system were social and theological trends that accorded women and femaleness great power and respect.

This tension can be traced to a number of sources. First, within this patriarchal system of religion and society another, more mainstream, current combined with the restorationist philosophy of founder Joseph Smith and his followers. So popular in the Victorian era at large, the current held that women were the inherently more spiritual and religious beings who should be lifted up and given more authority to renovate the character of men and society at large. This strain of thought shows up repeatedly within the writings of LDS women—indeed it serves as a steady undercurrent throughout the literature. Even male leaders, such as S.W. Richards, took up the theme with fervor:

(H)er keen appreciation and discernment of both the right, and the wrongs of life; are but exhibitions of her nature which is ever tending to the development of the divine; and which indicates her true relationship to that divinity of which man so often proves himself a stranger, that it may well be said, without her, “man is not in the Lord;” neither can he become legitimately a lord over and in the midst of intelligent beings.⁷

Against the patriarchal downplaying of women and women’s role, this stream of thought argued for a necessary mutuality between men and women as they made their way towards the goal of salvation and godhood.

⁷ S.W. Richards, “Woman’s Exponent,” *Woman’s Exponent* 22, no.11 (Jan. 15, 1894): 81.

However, this stream of thought, the very trend that Smith was fighting against when he moved towards a patriarchal society, was used to support and explain the patriarchal system itself. This was especially true in explanations for the practice of polygamy where its advocates openly argued that men were indeed further than women from God and godly living. According to this rationale for polygamy, the solution to this problem for LDS leaders was to allow men live out their libidinous and baser beings within the confines of the socially and spiritually controlled practice of plural marriage. Only by the double-edged process of giving into and, at the same time, controlling men's urges and characters would society be lifted up and would men take up and remain committed to their god-given responsibilities. Only by giving power, authority, and respect to the spiritually weaker vessel, would society as whole be regenerated and renewed.

In the early twentieth century, Edwin T. Woolley, a bishop and businessman in Ogden, Utah, explained in some detail to a dissenting outsider how this premise underlay the practice of polygamy. Using the blunt phraseology of stock raising, he noted the difference between men and women and explained why women were not allowed to take multiple husbands—something that the outsider, a man named Prescott, could not understand:

What man having a valuable mare would breed her to Seventeen Stallions, but one Stallion could serve Seventeen mares and results could be very satisfactory. A woman can not be anything else than a woman though of course she may be a depraved specimen. A man can not be a woman he may sink lower in the scale of morality than any dog because even a dog will not have sexual intercourse with a beast of another kind or its own gender but a depraved man will.⁸

Women were praised and exalted in words, while in the practice and within the structure of the community, they were, to this outsider, Prescott, treated in an unfair and unequal

⁸ Edwin T. Woolley, diary, May 14, 1905, Huntington Library.

manner. While this stream of Victorian thought was an important element within the LDS culture, at least provisionally it could be fitted into the overarching patriarchal structure of the community.

Other tendencies in the LDS understanding of the plan of salvation, however, could not be so easily assimilated into these structures. Specifically, within the process and history of Mormon salvation, the pivotal roles of the Mother(s) in Heaven and Eve challenged the strong patriarchal focus of the community and offered mute and usually unexplained contradictions to this focus. According to Smith, God produced all of the spirit children on the spiritual plane in the same manner that children come to be in mortal existence—through the commingling of male and female. Because of this belief, a female divinity was inevitable within the LDS cosmology. Wilcox, as well as Heeren, Lindsey and Mason, all correctly, I think, point to the fact that this belief in a Mother in Heaven developed, not out of radical feminist sensibilities in early Mormonism, but out of the radically literalistic and down-to-earth stance of early and subsequent Mormonism. Wilcox notes in her examination of the concept: “This development of theology by means of inference and commonsense extension of ordinary earth-life experience continued on into the twentieth century. In fact, it is the primary approach taken by most of those who have made mention of a Mother in Heaven.”⁹ If God the Father was a literal being who produced in the preexistence literal spirit children, including Jesus Christ, then, logically, that father figure would need a female partner in procreation. The development of this belief in the Mother in Heaven was an outgrowth of the basic nature of Mormon theology and belief, not a self-conscious attempt to create a female divinity

⁹ Linda Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” *Sunstone* 22, no. 3-4 (June 1999): 79. Heeren, Lindsey, and Mason, using a more sociological approach, back up this interpretation: “In our view, then, it is the anthropomorphic conception of God which is central to explaining the appearance of the Mormon Mother in Heaven belief. This anthropomorphism is not only an essential feature of the Mormon viewpoint, but seems to differentiate Mormon belief from superficially similar beliefs of Shakers and others.” John Heeren, Donald B. Lindsey, and Marylee Mason, “The Mormon Concept of Mother in Heaven: A Sociological Account of Its Origins and Development,” *Journal for the Sociological Study of Religion* 23, no. 4 (Dec. 1984): 403.

for social, religious, or political reasons. In its own way, this was a radical development, but made within the context of an increasingly patriarchal and conservative belief system.

Because of the overlapping of the belief in an anthropomorphic God and the ancient Hebraic example of polygamous marriage relation that was thought to model the divine family, Mormon theology became and still is fuzzy about whether or not there are actually multiple Mothers in Heaven who partnered with God the Father.¹⁰ The church has never produced an official statement clearing this issue one way or the other, though some scholars argue that the church is still polygamous in theology, even as it roundly denounces the earthly practice in a social climate where the once shockingly radical LDS church has stepped into the mainstream of American religious life.¹¹

This anthropomorphic pairing (or pairings) created a system in which gender differences became eternal and final. Sociologist O. Kendall White, for instance, argues that Mormonism essentialized the gender distinction by making God the Father and all his priesthood representatives literally male. Similarly, the model of femaleness and female spiritual power was essentialized in the role of a silent and unseen helpmate and mother. White writes:

Mormon theology assumes that sexual differentiation is inherent in reality itself. Neither sexual differentiation nor the categories implying it are products of creation. A Father-in-Heaven requires the existence of a Mother-in-Heaven, and the Mormon references to both, though the language is typically masculine, are not metaphorical.¹²

¹⁰ Wilcox, for instance, notes: “A question to which there is as yet no definitive answer—but much speculation—is whether there is more than one Mother in Heaven. The Church’s doctrinal commitment to plural marriage as well as the exigencies of producing at least billions of spirit children suggest the probability—some believe necessity—of more than one Mother in Heaven. Wilcox, “Mother in Heaven,” 83.

¹¹ B. Carmon Hardy, *The Solemn Covenant* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 349.

¹² O. Kendall White, “Ideology of the Family in Nineteenth Century Mormonism.” *Sociological Spectrum* 6 (1986): 289-306.

Alternatively, a nineteenth-century woman author, designated only as “Aunt Ruth,” explained well this LDS belief as she considered the “Woman’s Sphere” in a musing essay on the subject: “Each woman possesses a separate and distinct identity that cannot become any part of another identity. This identity is destined to be preserved intact through all the eternities that are to come and has within it the elements of adaptation and fitness to all conditions, both as pertaining to the present as well as to the future.”¹³ With the accompanying LDS belief that all spirit was simply rarified matter—at the purest, highest end of a wide spectrum that began in heaven and ended on earth—men were male to their very core and center of being, while women were female in essence. Men were fleshly representatives of the Heavenly Father, as women embodied their spiritual mother. Maleness and femaleness were not metaphorical or abstract concepts, but integral and complementary parts of the very creation of the universe, and each played a vital part in the creation and maintenance of the structure of the universe and the plan of salvation.

Even in the early days of Mormonism, however, church leaders rarely described or even mentioned the Mother in Heaven. In 1909, the presidency of the church made an authoritative statement verifying her existence.¹⁴ Confirming that humans were made

¹³ Aunt Ruth [Ruth May Fox?], “Woman’s Sphere,” *Woman’s Exponent* 16, no. 4 (July 15, 1887): 29. In a similar vein, S.W. Richards justifies the separate “sphere” of women as originating in the innately different beings of men and women. He writes: “Her acute sensitive temperament, her devotional nature, her noble qualities of heart and mind, are endowments which richly qualify her for the duties of several stations assigned. Though women is from and of the man [referring to the Genesis story of the creation of Eve from Adam’s side], she is not the man, neither can she be. She is a separate and distinct creation, and has her sphere of action and duty, which requires both organization and powers the man does not possess. As a helpmate, she is not the slave of man. S.W. Richards, “Woman,” *Woman’s Exponent* 17, no. 14 (Dec. 15, 1888): 109. This essentializing of the gender difference in the LDS belief system seems to have cemented and justified in an ultimate fashion, the common, Victorian assumption of a separate and proper “sphere” of action and behavior for women.

¹⁴ Wilcox, “Mother in Heaven,” 81. In the past decade or so, the leadership of the church has, in fact, banned the practice of public prayer or mention of the Mother(s) in Heaven on the grounds that it is too sacred and secret a doctrine to speak of openly or to non-believers. Excommunication has followed for those not heeding this directive. Jan Shipps, “Dangerous History: Laurel Ulrich and her Mormon Sisters,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 29 (Oct. 20, 1993): 1012-1015.

literally in the image of God, the presidency stated: “All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity.”¹⁵ However, beyond this bare confirmation, little came down from the leadership in the way of theological description or exploration of this intriguing, but ever-shadowy figure(s). Rather, she appears, still sparsely, in a kind of official folk tradition that shows up in women’s diaries and particularly in the contemporary Mormon women’s periodical, the *Woman’s Exponent*.

The Heavenly Mother first appeared in the Nauvoo period of the church (1839-1846) when, according to Zina D.H. Young, Smith revealed to her the existence of a Mother God as a way of assuaging her deep grief about the death of her own, earthly mother.¹⁶ Like the covert practice of polygamy during this time, the belief seems to have spread from there, and informally, among the inner circle of elite Mormon men and women already bound together by the potentially disastrous secret of plural marriage.

Eliza R. Snow, a vital member of this elite and a plural wife of Joseph Smith and then Brigham Young, made the most important and well-known statement about this heavenly mother. In around 1845, Snow wrote “O, My Father,” a poem celebrating the father and mother god pairing, and, set to music, a hymn that would become extraordinarily popular among nineteenth-century LDS members. In this early period of the church and even into the early twentieth century, many men and women leaders and members considered this hymn to rank as a revelation, and Eliza R. Snow, herself, was

¹⁵ Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon F. Lund, “Editor’s Table: The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 13 (Nov. 1909): 78. Two pages later, the article states: “It [the doctrine] shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality.” Smith, et al, “The Origin of Man,” 80.

¹⁶ Wilcox, “Mother in Heaven,” 79.

counted as a prophetess and one who continued on, to a lesser degree, the prophetic tradition of her former husband, Joseph Smith.¹⁷

The last two verses of Snow's hymn are a clear and concise statement of the LDS conception of the divine pair and their place in heaven and the afterlife.

I had learned to call Thee Father,
Through Thy spirit from on high;
But until the Key of Knowledge
Was restored I knew not why,
In the heavens are parents single?
No; the thought makes reason stare!
Truth is reason, Truth eternal
Tells me I've a Mother there.

When I leave this frail existence,
When I lay this mortal by,
Father, Mother, may I meet you
In your courts on high?
Then at length, when I've completed
All you sent me forth to do,
With your mutual approbation
Let me come and dwell with you.¹⁸

¹⁷ This feeling of reverence for Snow is demonstrated very clearly in a description of Snow's surprise entrance into the Salt Lake City 14th Ward Relief Society meeting not long before her death and after a long seclusion because of sickness. The meeting was instantly energized as the other women members apparently wept with joy at the sight of Snow: "...surprise and joy suddenly filled every heart and lighted up each countenance. This happy effect was occasioned by the entering, unannounced, of Zion's venerable, honored and beloved Priestess and Poetess, Sister Eliza R. Snow Smith." The speaker immediately stopped her talk and all spontaneously began to sing Snow's hymn, "O, my Father," many then testifying to the spiritual power and authority of this "prophetess." L. G. R. [Lula Greene Richards?], "A Delightful Meeting," *Woman's Exponent* 16, no. 9 (Oct. 1, 1887): 68.

¹⁸ George D. Pyper, *Stories of Latter-day Saint Hymns: Their Authors and Composers* (n.p.: George D. Pyper, 1939), 1. The first two verses of the hymn develop the necessary accompanying idea of a preexistence in which the Father and Mother Gods produced the spirit children who would later need to find earthly tabernacles:

O my Father, Though that dwellest
In the high and glorious place!
When shall I regain Thy presence,
And again behold Thy face?
In Thy holy habitation,
Did my spirit once reside;
In my first primeval childhood
Was I nurtured near Thy side?

For a wise and glorious purpose

According to Snow, all those who were faithful and fully understood and lived their lives according to the LDS doctrine would find the reward of an eternal family waiting patiently in the afterlife for the returning offspring and siblings—and not just a father God and elder brother, Jesus Christ, but also a divine mother. Anticipating the expected disbelief with a little disdain of its own, the hymn scoffs, if mortal life follows the pattern of heaven, how could it be any other way? With this hymn, Snow confirmed the existence and crucial importance of the Mother in Heaven within the LDS processes of salvation.

One might think that the popularity of this revelatory hymn indicated that members had a great interest in the subject of the heavenly pair, but beyond this revelatory, hymnic statement, little was said about the Mother in Heaven within the public and private literature produced by LDS women. Even when women writers touched on the Mother in Heaven, as White has pointed out, they often presented her as a kind of silent divine partner who mothered her spirit children and left the spotlight to her male counterpart. She was the ultimate comfort for those women and men who conducted their lives well, conscientiously, and devotedly. The poem, “A Thread of Sacred Thought,” written for the Relief Society jubilee in 1892 by L.L. Greene Richards, contains one of the few mentions of the Mother in Heaven as it sketches the scenario of the departing and returning children.

We were there with God, our Father,
And voted, ‘Thy will be done,’
And our Mother, Queen in Heaven,
Smiled on us every one,

Thou hast placed me here on earth,
And withheld the recollection
Of my former friends and birth;
Yet oftentimes a secret something
Whispered, “You’re a stranger here;”
And I felt that I had wandered
From a more exalted sphere.

Smiled on each Eve, each Sarah,
Rachel, Rebecca and Ruth,
Elizabeth, Mary and Martha,
Each daughter that stood for truth.

...Well! here we are my sisters,
In the classes we came to fill;
Learning out daily lessons,
Doing our Father's will.
He will clasp our hands with welcomes,
When the mystic veil is drawn,
And as conquerors we enter,
Where we hailed the First Great Dawn.¹⁹

The Father plans and dynamically brings to fruition the scheme of salvation, the spirit daughters freely agree to it, and the Mother quietly smiles her approval, but seems to stay wholly outside the discussions. The women set off bravely to carry out their “Father’s will,” and his welcoming approval in the end is the motivation for these daughters in earthly tabernacles to keep faithful and brave throughout the trials of mortality. After sending her daughters forth on the perilous journey of mortality, the Mother in Heaven drops out of the picture altogether, not even making an appearance in the happy eternal reunion.

Snow’s poetic hymn seems to have served a profound model for how later women writers understood and presented the Mother in Heaven. As seen in the above poem, in literary discussions, the Mother in Heaven usually appeared at the crucial time when spirit children departed and then returned to their heavenly home—the very moment Snow captured in her poem. In her journal, Jane Kartchner Morris focused on this same moment as she self-consciously re-worked Snow’s poem in her undated prayer to the Mother in Heaven.

Oh! My Mother Thou that dwellest,
In your mansions up on high,
How you pressed me to your bosom,

¹⁹ L. L. Greene Richards, “A Thread of Thought,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29, nos. 6-7 (Aug. 15 and Sept. 1, 1900): 27.

Bade me a true child to be
E're I left my home Eternal
To accept mortality.

How you gave me words of counsel,
Guides to aid my straying feet,
How you taught by true example,
All of Fathers laws to keep.
While I strive in this probation,
Well to live the Gospel truth(s?),
May I merit your approval,
As I did in early youth.²⁰

Here, the Mother in Heaven fulfills the role that contemporary Mormon mothers were expected to skillfully perform. She acts as the spiritual center of the divine family, showing by both words and examples how her children should live, and serving as the ever-present conscience of her children, even during the forgetfulness of mortality. In mild contrast to Greene's Mother in Heaven, she is the Victorian mother writ large and divine—quietly and non-confrontationally active and influential, but very much in the picture.

²⁰ Like Snow's, Morris' poem is four verses long, ending thus:

Tis recorded in Your journal
How you stood by Fathers side,
When by power, zeal, eternal
Thou wast sealed a Goddess bride.
When through love, and truth, and virtue,
E're in time thou didst become,
In thine high, exalted station
Mother of the souls of men.

When of evil I've repented
And the work on earth is done,
Dearest Mother, Loving Father,
Pray forgive Thy erring one.
When my pilgrimage is ended,
And the victors crown is won,
Dearest Mother to your bosom,
Please welcome back **this** one.

Jane Kartchner Morris, journals and reminiscences 1916 Oct-1971 Feb., third volume, 148, Historical Department, Archives and Manuscripts Division, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

We should note that Morris re-tooled Snow's hymn for a Relief Society meeting. Like its inspiration, this poem-prayer was a participatory song. Though Morris' poem may or may not have had a long life in the ward-level Relief Society, LDS faithful repeatedly and enthusiastically sung Snow's poem in church meetings from the local to general levels. Sometimes called "The Grand Invocation," throughout the Mormon Southwest and diaspora, members often sang it as an opening prayer at practically any and all gatherings, be they religious, social, political, or cultural. Women may not have literarily contemplated the Mother in Heaven in great depth, but she was continually present to the community within the most sacred hymn-prayer of LDS ritual. She and her divine husband stood at the center of Mormon worship. Like Greene's divine mother in the first poem, in this musical form, she was a silent, but reassuring and ever-present reality to Mormon women and men. Perhaps we can best witness the real, but intangible power of the repeated performance this now-forgotten hymn when we consider that today's church leadership has aggressively forbidden prayers to the Mother in Heaven.²¹ What was once an unexplained, but ever-abiding reality in Mormon public worship has become today an unexplained but theologically necessary non-presence.

While this invisible existence of the Mother in Heaven did not openly challenge the power of God the Father, it did confirm that women and femaleness also had a divine foundation and, thus, even this usually implicit goddess acted as a tension-producing pole within the patriarchal focus of the theology and church. The Mother in Heaven also presented somewhat of a problem to the women of the community as they found little in the way of guidance and example in this figure and, consequently, had to look to other places for models of female life, behavior, and being. Belief in the Mother(s) in Heaven encouraged women to see in themselves an element of her divinity, but women and men

²¹ Jan Shipps, "Dangerous History: Exploring the Role of Mormon Women," *The Christian Century* 110, no. 29 (October 20, 1993): 1012-1015.

were left to develop their own cohesive and coherent conceptions of the details of this divinity.

Scripture was one of the more traditional places that LDS women writers found inspiration for understanding the importance and meaning of female life. In the LDS plan of salvation, Eve was and is one of the most outstanding and powerful female scriptural figures. Her and Adam's actions in bringing about the painful, but necessary mortal phase of existence mark her out as a savior figure less visible, but on par with Jesus Christ. In her role as co-savior of humanity, traditionally despised and blamed, Eve became an example for all women to follow and think about and, in this way, even more than the Mother in Heaven, she offered an unanswerable question and conundrum within the patriarchal focus of the early Mormon community.

In the more traditional Christian interpretation of the Fall, of course, Eve is often blamed for convincing Adam to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge, fruit that the couple was strictly forbidden to touch by God. When Adam and Eve ate this fruit, they were pushed out of the garden, Eve was made subject to Adam and forced to bear children in pain and agony. Sin, evil, suffering and death were introduced into the world and Eve was blamed for this development.

Carried by faithful converts who still maintained mental and emotional connections with their earlier churches of origin, this negative interpretation of the figure of Eve remained latent in Mormon theology and culture. The more traditional view of the Fall actually quite regularly surfaced within the corpus of Mormon women's poetry and literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an article on polygamy reprinted in the *Exponent* from another Mormon journal, for instance, the author defended the practice on the grounds that it forced women to become educated and more

independent—as already noted, an argument that modern historians later utilized in explanation, rather than defense of the practice. As the article goes on, however, the argument shifts and suggests that the emotionally difficult practice of polygamy served as a kind of compensatory and intensive suffering for LDS women and, thereby, would eventually revoke the curse initiated by the actions of Eve. The author notes that the “effect of their [the plural wives’] examples” will provide impetus for coming generations of women to improve themselves and that: “nobler types of womanhood will be developed until the penalty laid upon woman in the beginning, that ‘thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee,’ will be repealed, and she will stand side by side with man, full of that queenly dignity and self control which will make her his suitable companion rather than his inferior.”²² By participating in the practice of plural marriage on a large scale, LDS women would act to reverse and revoke Eve’s mistake. This was not one of the major explanations for plural marriage (which tended more toward the social and salvific), but this snippet of an argument demonstrates that traditional, critical understandings of the figure of Eve were present within this community of converts and that these interpretations could be activated at any time and for many purposes.²³

Most often, however, the figure of Eve was understood in extremely positive terms in relationship to the overall Mormon structure of salvation. So, for instance, Zina D.H. Young remembered that in a local meeting of LDS women in Lehi, Utah, her

²² “Topics of the Times,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 20 (March 15, 1884): 157.

²³ Two camps on Eve appear in the literature of LDS women. On the one hand, the revisionists seek to renovate the figure of Eve completely--see below. On the other hand, authors and poets use the traditional interpretation of the curse as a terrible fall, but they adapt it, so that both men and women share the blame equally. Emily Hill Woodmansee takes this tack when she argues that throughout time women have been unfairly targeted for initiating the curse, but that this unfair burden has also been the salvation of humanity. Emily Hill Woodmansee, “Behold the Dawn,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9, no. 10 (Oct. 15, 1880): 73.

husband, Brigham Young, entered the room and, apparently overwhelmed and overjoyed at the sight of such concentrated female spiritual magnificence, exclaimed: “What do I see before me? A congregation of Eves.”²⁴ In this comment, he was not denigrating the women; rather, he greatly honored those before him by comparing them to their earthly mother and maternal model of creation. On a similar upbeat note, “Hermita” noted in an essay in the *Woman’s Exponent* that: “I am sure that if we are fortunate enough to meet and associate with our beloved Queen—Mother Eve we will have an esteem and love for her, that words but faintly can express.”²⁵ Eve, in these two views, was an honored, scriptural figure to be respected and emulated by contemporary women.

For the LDS women faithful of this period, Eve’s role was crucial not only because she introduced actual suffering and evil into the world as necessary testing agents for humanity, but also because she introduced the *knowledge* of good and evil into the world. According to LDS theology of this period, this knowledge was what allowed humans to make choices about the path they would travel throughout their lives. This knowledge was the first step towards ultimate godhood. In order to achieve godhood, humans had to fully understand good and evil and freely chose the virtuous, though difficult path. Discussing suffrage—a topic which often stimulated authors to bring up the figure of Eve—Mary Ann Pratt explained how this worked: “In the beginning God gave the law to Adam and Eve. Eve suffered the penalty, and gained the knowledge of

²⁴ “Utah County Silk Association,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9, no. 7 (Sept. 1, 1880): 56.

²⁵ Hermita, “Familiarity Breeds Contempt,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9, no. 16 (Jan. 15, 1881): 121. To further demonstrate the complexity and the shifting nature of the interpretation of Eve, later on in the essay, “Hermita” describes how Eve was tricked into eating the fruit by a wily Lucifer, using this as an example of why her readers should be careful about deceptive appearances and clearly here interpreting Eve’s fall in a traditional, negative manner.

good and evil. She became the mother of all living, to act a conspicuous part in the drama of human existence.”²⁶ Similarly, in an 1894 *Exponent* essay, S.W. Richards argued the LDS position that Eve’s fall was essential because she initiated the process whereby humans could become as Gods. He wrote: “When in the garden, woman was master of the situation; for a time she held the destiny of a world in her hands, and not until man yielded to her persuasive power did she commit that destiny to the keeping of her lord.”²⁷ Eve used all of her “lovely form and earnest eloquence” pleading with Adam “to share with her the conditions by which, and by which alone, they could become as Gods, knowing both good and evil, and thereby inherit those attributes without which there is no God.”²⁸ For this crucial part that Eve played, Richards assured his presumably largely female audience that: “Woman may well be proud today of the part she acted in the glorious panorama of human existence, she chose her part and played it well, to the end that man might be, and have like knowledge as the Gods.”²⁹ When, on the surface, Eve degraded humanity by introducing suffering into the world, she also, paradoxically, elevated that same humanity by giving them a vital characteristic of divinity—the power

²⁶ Mary Ann Pratt, “Give to Those Rights to Whom Rights Belong,” *Woman’s Exponent* 8, no. 21 (April 1, 1880): 165. Hannah T. King reinforces this view of Eve as the one who set in motion the process of life and salvation. She writes: “Eve, the sovereign mother of all living. She stands in close proximity to God the Father, for she is the life giving spirit of the innumerable hosts that have figured upon this earth. The one grand, stupendous act of her life is all that is told of her in the Bible, and it is enough.” Hannah T. King, “Women of the Scriptures,” *Woman’s Exponent* 32, no. 6 (Nov. 1903): 41.

²⁷ S.W. Richards, “Woman’s Exponent,” *Woman’s Exponent* 22, no. 11 (Jan. 15, 1894): 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of free choice. In this way, Eve became the first savior figure who put the process of salvation in motion, just as Jesus Christ was born to put an end to this same process.³⁰

Somewhere in between the negative and positive interpretations of this female scriptural figure, Eve also became a polemical, even humorous vehicle for discussion about the respective roles of men and women. In a lecture before a local Utah Women's Suffrage Association, Amelia B. Sidwell dismissed the blame attached to Eve, noting that she was forced to wander alone for ages in a garden, deprived of her female companions that she knew in the preexistence. Her only company was Adam, who, Sidwell argued: "...if I am allowed to judge Adam by most men of my acquaintance, he was probably very indifferent company, as men's conversational brilliance is seldom exerted to any considerable extent for the benefit or entertainment of a wife."³¹ Taking a slightly different tack, L.L. Greene Richards poetically and enviously imagined Eve's idyllic existence in the Garden where she had nothing to do but enjoy the beautiful nature:

No dishes to wash after breakfast,
No planning of what to have next,
For luncheons or dinner or supper,
No man disappointed and vexed.³²

LDS women writers utilized a now unfairly maligned Eve as a kind of literary catharsis to release frustration about their own, seemingly mundane troubles and injustices. The woman who set humans on the path to divinization through humanization offered a model of how to think about the complicated religious question of free will and the purpose of mortal life. She also served as a literary safety valve for women to express

³⁰ See Lehi's deathbed scene in the Book of Mormon for a fuller explanation of this LDS understanding of the necessary Fall, 2 Nephi 2: 22-28.

³¹ Amelia B. Cox Sidwell, "Women of the Bible," *Woman's Exponent* 18, no. 17 (February 1, 1890): 136.

³² L. L. Greene Richards, "Charity and Labor," *Woman's Exponent* 28, no. 4 (July 15, 1899): 28.

their frustrations about the daily grind of dishes, meals, and family obligations—perhaps even the “perfect obedience” that Martha Cragun Cox found so difficult. She gave women an opportunity to directly, though non-confrontationally critique the patriarchal family structure so emphasized in the community. For these writers, she was a creative, female model in an otherwise overwhelmingly male scriptural line-up.

As can be seen, an inherent tension remained latent and sometimes apparent in the theological understanding of the LDS community. On the one hand, the church was, in theology and structure, self-consciously patriarchal. God the Father was the motivating and the focal point of salvation. As made up of potentially all male members of the church, the Mormon priesthood held the key to all the salvific rituals of the church, while, at the same time, the priesthood stood as patriarchs and father figures for the community, from the ward level to the general level. On the other hand, Mormonism had a less prominent female divinity or divinities, by necessity, within its progressive plan of salvation. Women were counseled to be obedient to their husbands and priesthood leaders, but their own roles as mothers modeled on this female divinity were also vitally necessary to salvational progression. The scriptural figure of Eve further balanced out and implicitly challenged the patriarchal focus of the church since she was the one who first instituted the process and plan of salvation. Even within the patriarchal structure of the theology and institution of the church, women and femaleness were crucial within the plan of salvation. Women looked to and discussed these scriptural and theological figures in order to find meaning and value to their lives within the church. Given this tension, and these female religious models, women’s seemingly contradictory limited independence within the early Mormon church becomes clearer and more understandable. Women were living within their interpretation of LDS theology and scripture.